UNNECESSARY BLINDNESS

Helen Keller

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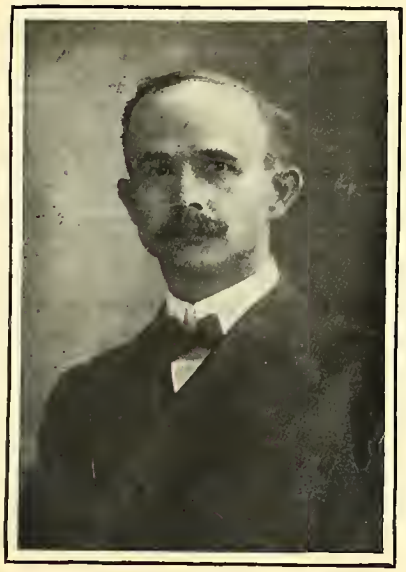
Jennie K. Gossip among them was rife and common. Not a single father, mother or teacher suspected it.

I sent for Jennie K. and her mother. She was a pleasant, sweet-faced child; her mother appeared to be a refined and intelligent woman. I found that the girl was more or less forward. I explained to her that the proceeding was entirely in her interest, that no one but her mother and me should know the facts, and in the most tactful way her confidence was gained. The mother was surprised to know that her little girl could have written pages and pages of vile stuff about which she supposed the child was ignorant. The child frankly told her mother that she had known of such facts since she was nine years old, and that such forbidden subjects had been a part of the conversation of a dozen of her companions since she was eleven. She also told her mother, in my presence, that at least fifteen boys in the school had made improper suggestions to her; she admitted that, though she fully understood, she had never cried, never slapped any boy in the face, never bowed her head in shame, never gone to the teacher or mother with the slightest word. She also admitted receiving, without detection, many improper notes in the schoolroom, and that she had never informed either parent or teacher of this.

She told me she could give me the names of at least twelve girls in her school who talked just as much as she did about such matters, and to whom boys said the same things they said to her.

THE very day I write this a father and mother have spent an hour talking to me of their sixteen-year-old daughter who has fallen to the very depths. The girl admitted to me in their presence that her first knowledge of such matters had come to her through notes passed about in the school, and through the common gossip that floats among children at the curious age; that impure suggestions had come to her before she was twelve years old; that she had shown no proper resentment; that she knew of evil then, but did not understand. No sympathetic, fond and loving heart had ever explained. Yet her mother never knew. With these parents was another daughter, sweet and pure, seven years of age. I have no doubt that the experience of this mother with her sixteen-year-old daughter may be the means of saving the girl of seven. The mother told me that the older girl had at the same age been even more beautiful, more sweet and fetching than the little girl who seemed a perpetual life of sunshine in the prosperous, well-ordered home.



Judge Lindsey

of the school boys and girls in the city and country are extremely curious regarding matters of sex; and I have no hesitation in stating that boys discuss it in a most improper and unfortunate way. I have been amazed to find that this same condition exists among girls to a much greater extent than I ever dreamed. I have learned this in the children's court, after repeated experiences in talking to little girls and their mothers in the privacy of my chambers, regarding their troubles brought to my attention by parents, officers and principals of schools.

WE MUST remember that children read the daily papers; that they frequently hear discussions among their elders which are more or less veiled with the idea that the children do not understand; that they are constantly in the streets, back and forth from school, directly or indirectly in contact with those who are much older than themselves. It is no wonder that at a very early age their curiosity may take a dangerous turn. Thence comes the necessity for companionship between mothers and their girls, between fathers and their boys.

I have had hundreds of children in my experience who were involved in such troubles, and I have made it an invariable rule to ask a girl in the presence of her mother, and always to ask the boy, if the parent has counseled in regard to such matters, and always the answer has been that their only information came from the street, and from older companions. I can say without hesitation that not more than one child in twenty cases has ever been able to tell me that either father or mother had ever given him any counsel or advice on the most important matters of life, pure and holy when properly understood, but one of the greatest sources of corruption in childhood, and therefore in manhood and in womanhood, when not properly explained, or when learned from the filthy, poisonous sources of the street.

Now, I ask: Does this condition of things justify the mock-modesty, the unwillingness of parents to be frank with their children and discuss, as they should, the matters of sex with them? I have met with scores of parents who have felt this way about the matter, but I have never known of a single case, out of the large number which I have dealt with in these six years, where the parents did not afterward admit the mistake and thank God that the awakening came before it was too late. But in some instances—ah, in too many instances—the eyes of the parents were opened too late! And that is the sad part of the matter—the girl finds out too late what her parents might have and should have told her in time!

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Unnecessary Blindness

By Helen Keller

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Unnecessary Blindness

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In Which the Remarkable Statement is Advanced that Blindness Could Have Been Prevented in Two-Fifths of All Cases by the Proper Treatment

WE ALL know that a large number of people become blind every year. But it is not generally known that many human eyes are needlessly lost which, if right corrective and preventive measures were employed, would be saved to the service of the world. And what we should know, in particular, is that much of this blindness can be prevented by the mothers themselves.

We live in an epoch of reform. I read that men and women are valiantly contending against the greed and neglect that condemn thousands of children to dwarf their minds and bodies in labor; I hear that we are striving to protect ourselves against impure food and dangerous "patent medicines." But of all ignorance which needs to be dispelled by the spirit of regeneration among us, none is more intolerable than that which wantonly permits children to be plunged into the abyss of blindness.

"Infantile Ophthalmia" Often Causes Blindness

TWO-FIFTHS of all blindness could have been prevented by precautionary or curative treatment. Of this, one-quarter, or one-tenth of the whole, is due to what is called "ophthalmia neonatorum"—that is, "infantile ophthalmia."

"What is ophthalmia neonatorum?" It is an inflammation of the eyes which attacks the new-born child and is one of the most prolific causes of blindness. It is occasioned by germs finding an entrance in the eyes of the child during the process of birth. In from twenty-four to sixty hours after the birth of the child whose eyes have been infected the eyes grow red and a watery secretion comes from the lids. This soon grows thicker and more profuse until a creamy discharge pours out from the eyes. The lids become swollen, hard and red. If this condition is allowed to continue the eyeballs become ulcerated until finally they rupture and the child in many cases becomes blind.

All this can be prevented. If, at the time of birth, the baby's eyelids are gently wiped dry with a little absorbent cotton and the lids held open while the eyes are flushed with a saline solution—as warm and as salt as normal tears—the malignant germs *may* be washed away and the danger averted.

But as it is not always possible for those with untrained hands to accomplish this skillfully and thoroughly, and as under any circumstances we cannot be certain that all of the virulent microscopic germs are removed, it is necessary as a further step that one or two drops of a solution of nitrate of silver of a determined strength be dropped in each eye of the new-born child. Should a strong solution be used, as it may be by the physician, it should be immediately neutralized by a few drops of slightly salted boiled water; with a weaker solution this neutralization is not necessary. This silver preparation destroys the germs without injuring the eyes, and its use practically eliminates this frightful disease as a cause of blindness.

A Preventive Solution Should Invariably be Used

AS IT is never possible to know in which baby's eyes the germs have found lodgment, and as the use of the silver is safe and sure, the preventive solution should be invariably employed at every birth. To delay or omit it is to invite unnecessary danger.

It happens, however, in a few cases, even where silver nitrate is used, that some of the microbes escape destruction and remain to threaten the sight. This does not mean that all is lost, that the child's chances are gone. The same remedy judiciously applied at a sufficiently early period in the progress of the disease and under competent medical advice will destroy the germs and thereby control the inflammation and still prevent blindness.

Since the value and importance of this measure is universally conceded, and its employment commended by the medical profession, it would seem remarkable that it does not form a part of the toilet of every new-born child, and the inquiry is naturally suggested: why is it not always employed in the eyes of the new-born? How can it ever happen that so simple a preventive measure can be omitted when its neglect leads to such disastrous consequences? In almost all of the large hospitals and in the practice of nearly every careful scientific physician it is, indeed, a routine measure, but ignorance, indifference and negligence are still abroad in the land, and until those shall be aroused who feel a moral responsibility in defending the rights of the helpless infant thus cruelly assailed, babies will be blinded and lives will be blighted, world without end.

Why Silver Solution is Not Always Employed

THERE would seem to be three reasons why every physician (and every midwife who takes the physician's responsibilities at a birth) does not invariably employ a silver solution in the eyes of every new-born child: first, many who have to deal with the expectant mother are not acquainted with the character of this germ disease and have not yet learned the importance and necessity of preventive measures; others hesitate to employ this valuable specific from a wrong impression that it may harm the tender eye of the infant child; but the neglect in far the greater number of cases is due to the fact that the silver solution does not happen to be present at the moment at which it is needed, and as the majority of children escape infection the chance is taken that each child may be one of the fortunate. The propitious moment at which the silver nitrate might be effectively employed is allowed to pass, and when next the opportunity comes it may be too late.

Mothers Should Demand that the Remedy be at Hand

IN ORDER that this pitiable condition be not allowed to continue, two things should be done at once. A campaign of education should be inaugurated and every expectant mother should be made acquainted with the peril which may threaten her child so that she may insist that it be protected; and then the State should freely and gratuitously place in the hands of every accoucheur an aseptic silver solution that carries with it the assurance on the part of the highest medical authority as to its necessity, its purity and its safety.

There is but one reason why this great movement should not quickly and effectively succeed in abolishing infantile ophthalmia as a cause of blindness, and that is—general apathy. In order that the necessary and uniform legislation be secured in every State efforts must be made. The mothers in every State must demand it. In every class of society the women should know of the cause and dangers of this disease.

If the mothers of America could be made to realize that their babies are in danger of losing their sight, and that the dread calamity can be warded off by applying a simple, precautionary remedy at the right time, they would be quick to demand of those in authority that the symptoms of the disease shall be known by those whose duty it is to know them, and that for safety the remedy shall be at hand before the symptoms appear.

A careful examination of the children of the New York School for the Blind for several years showed that among fifty children ophthalmia neonatorum causes one case of blindness in three. In the country the relative number of cases resulting from infantile ophthalmia is greater than in the cities. The reason for this is that, though the disease is widespread, a physician in a small community may never have seen a case. He may not recognize the disease if it appears. If he knows about the nitrate of silver treatment he may fail to use it because he wrongly fears that it may injure the delicate eyes of the child. He may not see the child again for several days; then the disease has got beyond his control. The cornea is destroyed and the infant's sight irrecoverably lost! The safe rule for physicians is to regard with suspicion the slightest inflammation in the eyes of an infant, and it is the rule for mothers, too; for the mother who is watchful and informed will know how to make the right demand upon her physician.

Blindness in Infancy is Worse Than in Adult Life

THE mother thinks with joy and pride that her child will grow up in God's light to be a strong man, able to do a man's work. Suddenly she is plunged into the direlest anguish by the discovery that her child's beautiful eyes are put out forever. Not till then does she realize how terrible is the foe that has lurked by his cradle. Imagine her feelings if afterward she learns that this disaster was needless, that it could have been avoided by prompt, efficient measures. Her grief is embittered by indignation against the physician in whose hand she had placed the safety of her child. Whatever may be done to soften the misfortune of the child, her heart will never be whole again. For with her eyes she sees him begin his little life in the dark, grow up in the dark, work—if indeed he works at all—in the dark, and perhaps—die in the dark.

Blindness in infancy is worse than blindness in late childhood, or even in adult life. It arrests development. The plight of the blind baby is indeed heartrending. He loses much of the physical activity and incentive and the various intellectual experiences of the normal child. Even in the best of homes it is not often possible to give him the special, constant care, teaching and encouragement that he requires. He is not admitted to the kindergarten for the blind, if there be one, until he is five years old. In the mean time he grows weak and deformed in body and mind, and acquires nervous habits which it is extremely hard to break when his education begins. Your heart aches as you look at him, feeble, pitiful, enervated; beside his strong, merry comrades who have lost their sight at a later period, and who can go forward with firm steps where he halts and stumbles. Even if he is successfully taught, and develops capabilities, even if he is not doomed in his mature years, as are so many of the blind, to idleness and dependence, his loss of sight is irreparable. A blind person, however well instructed, however carefully equipped, can never be so free, so self-reliant as if he had his eyes. In this country, until very recently, little has been done to enable the grown-up blind to work for a livelihood, to earn their limited share of independence and self-support. They are for the most part poor, and if no relative or friend cares for them they become objects of charity, a burden to the State. Such is the lot of thousands of men and women who a generation ago needlessly lost their sight. Such is the fate that threatens our little ones today.

Eye Diseases in Babies Should be Reported

IT IS true that we are preparing to take better and better care of the blind. Intelligent work is going forward all over the country to lighten the burden of blindness. But, however merry our blind children, however brave and self-reliant our blind men, I say, could the utmost dreams of education for the sightless be realized, the dark is still the dark, and blindness an irremediable calamity.

Therefore I say, let us check this dread disease and danger. The State should require that every case of disease of the eye in the new-born be reported. If blindness follows, then an investigation should be instituted. The certainty that such an investigation would surely follow would compel physician and nurse to exercise the utmost care in the treatment of the new-born.

By such vigilance on the part of the Commonwealth hundreds of individuals would be spared misery and dependence, and the Commonwealth itself would be saved expense. The entire cost of preventing ophthalmia is indeed an ounce of prevention to the many pounds that avoidable blindness costs the State. The cost of educating a blind child in a good school is three hundred dollars a year. The special expense necessary to make a blind man self-supporting, even in conditions far better than now exist, must be an extra expense to the State. If, as is the too common case, a blind citizen becomes dependent through a long life, the gross sum spent for his maintenance is ten thousand dollars. This sum must be multiplied many times to determine the total loss; for by blindness a productive breadwinner is removed from the community.

If a tithe of the money we now spend to support unnecessary blindness were spent to prevent it, the State would be the gainer in terms of cold economy, not to speak of considerations of happiness and humanity. How, then, can a wise Commonwealth suffer a single case of avoidable blindness to pass unquestioned? We pay money in advance to insure our property and the property value of our lives. Yet we have not the foresight to insure our children against the bitter and costly evil of blindness!

Mothers and Physicians Can Wipe Out the Disease

IN ANCIENT times disease was looked upon as a curse to be conjured away. Later it was regarded as a necessary misfortune to be cured or alleviated. In our own time it is known to be the result of wrong living, and therefore to be avoided and prevented. Prevention has come to be the all-important aim of medical science. The fight to exterminate yellow fever and tuberculosis is a greater battle than any that the doctors have waged against disease after it has seized upon the patient. If our physicians have undertaken to exterminate so subtle an enemy as tuberculosis, they should make short work of ophthalmia neonatorum, which is obvious and easily cured. To do battle with it our physicians must march as soldiers have gone forth before, ordered by the State and urged on by women. American women can accomplish almost anything that they set their hearts on, and the mothers of the land together with the physicians can abolish infantile ophthalmia, yes, wipe it out of the civilized world.

This Startling Fact

Should Sink Deep into Every Mother's Heart

THERE are sixty-five thousand or more blind persons in the United States, according to the latest census. Twenty-five thousand or more have borne the disasters and hardships of total or partial darkness whose eyes, with proper care and treatment, could have been saved. Sixty-five hundred or more could have been preserved from darkness by a simple and inexpensive method if mothers and physicians had known how to treat the eyes of the new-born for ophthalmia neonatorum.

An Editor's Note in Regard to the Above Article

It may be of service here to state that there has been formed in New York an organization known as The New York Association for the Blind, with headquarters at 44 East 78th Street. Miss Winifred Holt is the corresponding secretary. This association has published literature on the subject of the prevention of blindness which it will gladly furnish to all who may apply. Doubtless it would give further information to any woman who may be interested to take up this vital question for civic action—a work than which no nobler exists for the hand of woman.

Why Girls Go Wrong

By Ben B. Lindsey

Judge of the Juvenile Court of Denver

"I Say it Unhesitatingly: That Nine-Tenths of Our Girls Go Wrong Because of the Carelessness of Parents"

I ONCE asked a little girl how it was that, when we had twenty bad boys in court, we only had one bad little girl. "Well," she replied, in the most innocent way, evidently wishing that the girls should not be outdone, "one bad little girl is worse'n twenty bad little kids, any time."

This little girl was even wiser than she knew, and the probation officer in the children's court knows too well the truth of this statement. A boy is generally a part of most girls' troubles, and one girl's case has often, through the skilled and careful work of the probation officers, yielded twenty men, women and children to be dealt with.

Now we men and women prefer to associate our thoughts of a little girl with all that is good and pure, and I thank God we can do so in most cases. There is no doubt whatever that the immoral little girl is exceptional. And while this is true, there is also danger in this statement, for, while the exceptional case must be in some family, is it quite beyond the possibilities that it should be in yours as well as in some other family?

I venture to say that there is scarcely a parent reading these words who would dream that such an instance as the following could have happened in a well-regulated school. An officer once brought to me two school copy-books containing some of the most improper literature that the fiendish mind of man could invent. It was discovered that one of the copy-books belonged to a thirteen-year-old boy; the other to a girl of the same age. They were both children from good homes of the better class.

The boy told me that the girl had obtained his copy-book quite by accident and had requested permission to copy its contents. The girl afterward, in the presence of her mother, verified all that the boy had said. This boy told me frankly that he knew six little girls in the same school who had similar copies, and who, from some source unknown to him, had similar literature which they had shown him, but which he had not seen fit to copy. This boy was bright, refined, stood well in school, attended his church, and at the time I talked to him was preparing for confirmation. Neither his father, mother, teacher nor preceptor had the slightest knowledge of this pollution in his life. No grown person had ever talked to him on such subjects except his father's coachman, who had handled them in the vilest way. He frankly told me that he had made improper suggestions to several little girls. I asked him about the girls he knew, and I found he had several playmates among them.

EXPECTING the same reply that always comes, I said, "Tom, why did you never have the same thoughts, make the same suggestions to Anna B?" (Of course no real names are used here.)

"Well," he said, "she is entirely different from Jennie K."

"What does Jennie say?" I asked him.

"She is kind of flip; she laughs and jokes about such things," he replied.

"If you were to say the same thing to Anna B. what would she do?" I asked.

"She would slap me in the face or never speak to me again—I could not think of such a thing. You know, Judge, she is different from Jennie."

That boy told me that among his playmates they frequently discussed

Within a week I had four boys from homes of our best neighborhoods complained of for a serious offense. I talked to those boys separately, and then to their fathers who accompanied them to my chambers. First I tried talking to the boys in the presence of their fathers, but their embarrassment was so painfully apparent and falsehood so surely encouraged thereby that one of the more sensible fathers suggested that they withdraw. I soon put the boys at their ease; they knew perfectly that I understood them, that, while I did not justify their conduct, there was a sufficient amount of sympathy to make the truth perfectly easy—and the truth is the most important thing in such cases.

Each boy admitted he had said improper things to little girls, and, with one exception, every little girl had turned it away with a flippant remark, as a mere joking, foolish thing, betokening smartness on the part of the boy. Not one of the fathers knew.

NOW, why did not these fathers and mothers know? They should have known, if they had known their children. But this is where the seat of the trouble lies: parents do not know their children, nor have they the least idea of what their children know, or what these children talk about and do when away from them.

It is all very well for us elders to retire behind the old excuse that the delicacy of this subject forbids its discussion. But the fact remains, nevertheless, that its very delicacy only emphasizes the extreme importance of the subject. I am convinced that this whole moral question among children, instead of being a question to be avoided, as it has been heretofore, by word of mouth or pen, is by far the most important problem that concerns the preservation of the American home, and as such cannot be any longer dodged, but must be squarely met. Beside this question, the mere matter of the boy or girl who steals or runs away is of small moment. If, then, the nation decay, as it must it the home is undermined, it is because mothers and fathers have proved false; it is because mothers and fathers are traitors to childhood's sacred cause. These are strong words, truly, but I have facts from actual experience upon which to base them.

My experience has shown clearly this one indisputable fact, and I say it unhesitatingly: that nine-tenths of our girls go wrong because of the carelessness and inattention of parents. They do not all land in the red-light district. They are in society, a part of its pollution and filth. They are responsible for many of the divorce causes, for the broken homes, desertions, sorrow, misery, blighted faith, despair, and the great mass of social ills which infest society, and of which we hear and know but little, except through suicide, divorce, desertion and the sensational exceptions that compel attention.

I say unhesitatingly that the great majority of girls who enter into a life of sin and are forced to the attention of the courts at sixteen or twenty, after the real mischief is done, began their wayward course as early as eleven and twelve. Every wayward girl I have talked to has assured me of this truth.

Nor is this startling fact so startling if we look at it in its right light.

Every father and mother may take it as an absolute fact that nine-tenths

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